

Eleanor Hallowell Abbott's Exciting "Old-Dad"



By GRANT M. OVERTON.

TO say a word of praise for a book by Eleanor Hallowell Abbott—or indeed any one of a dozen other women novelists—is to run terrific risks. The very least that will happen to you is that you will be accused of utter insincerity. If a person dares to defend the best sellers all the knowledgeable folk dismiss his argument as necessarily insincere. Not a bad way of evading the task of answering the argument, is it?

And to find pleasure in Eleanor Hallowell Abbott's stories will be to excite

boundless scorn of you. Franklin P. Adams, coming to hear of it, will be lightly derisive. With a Follett will decline to meet you, and you will be equally unwelcome at the Brevoort and at meetings of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (if we record the title correctly. They are sometimes known as the Immortelles).

Yet there are people who enjoy Miss Abbott, as we shall call her, Mrs. Coburn having too remote a ring. Quite a large number of them. A simple sort. Very crude. Foreheads like the House of the Seven Gables. Ourselves are one. We like Miss Abbott's new story, called *Old-Dad*.

It is so emotional that it intoxicated us slightly and brought the thought that though the Eighteenth Amendment shall be upheld forever, yet we may have a little session of hysteria all by ourselves now and then as long as Miss Abbott writes books. We thrill as she shakes up her words like ingredients in a cocktail mixer. Lips starker, people quicken into utterance, delightful girls gasp just before they pitch to the floor in a dead faint: "Oh, Father, what is it about boys that makes it so wicked to have them around?" Blue dogs with names like Creep-Mouse sniff at finger tips. Splendid, clean limbed, clean souled young men visit wistful and lovely young women just sitting up in bed after days and days of amnesia. Other young men who have lived not wisely but too well get drunk at the right moment to promote the kind of ending that brings back the reader for more. Heartless and middle aged women get their comeuppans (or comeuppances, as some prefer to say and spell). And the most surprising things happen with engaging rapidity. And every little while some one says something so clever or funny that if it were in a book by Henry James it would be quoted in the best circles.

Philosophy, too, stated with a vividness we would never dare ourselves, but that we like and envy. As when Jaffrey Bretton assures Sheridan Kaire: "Love isn't an overcoat, you know, Kaire. It's underclothes! The White Linen of Life! And there seems to be something—peculiarly and particularly offensive to a fastidious body—in being proffered personal linen which still retains even the scent—let alone the sweat—of a previous relation. . . ." As we say, we like that and envy it, but we feel at the bottom of our hearts that if it had been written by Oscar Wilde it would never have got past the late Mr. Comstock; and that had G. B. Shaw put such a speech in a play the Lord Chamberlain would not have licensed a performance in London. We insist it is all right. Shaw is too great a prude to have thought of such a thing, let alone writing it down.

The story of *Old-Dad* ought not to be revealed in advance; and anyway, there is this drawback, that no outline could convey an idea of the way Miss Abbott tells it, which is literally everything. We might say it was a story of how a young girl made the acquaintance of her father; but that would give no idea. More accurately, it is the story of a young girl in

an unpleasant scrape resulting in her expulsion from college; and it is further and essentially the story of how her father

undertook to convince the girl that one bad mess need not spoil her whole life. As she is a very girlish girl, his task is next to impossible, but an exciting night in the Florida Everglades helps him out in a way to make the writers of movie scenarios give up in utter discouragement. Another reason for enjoying the story is the important presence of a houseboat; though it puzzles us that the houseboat has no name. Every one else has a name. Besides *Old-Dad* there are the Outlaw and the Intruding Lady and a Teacher Dear and the Kissing Man and several others. The Helping Houseboat should receive its due.

When she was a girl Miss Abbott hated school and never did well in anything except the English classes. Her loathing for formal education is beautifully present in *Old-Dad*. We should thrill if she and Capt. Charles G. Norris, who wrote *Salt*, would get together on the subject. What a scathing novel they would produce!

Very seriously, any one who declines to examine Miss Abbott's tales, if only to find out the secret of her great popularity, is making a grave mistake. For you may compose a very nourishing drink, but flat, and most of us will not hanker for it; but if there is a sparkle and an effervescence so that every sip goes up your nose we all (well, most of us) stand in line to buy soda checks. It will not require a Nineteenth Amendment forbidding some potent varieties of fiction to sell this book.

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